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The
FIRST
CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH
OF WOODSTOCK • VERMONT



An Historical Sketch

by MARGARET L. JOHNSON



An Historical Sketch

DELIVERED BY MARGARET L. JOHNSON BEFORE
THE WOODSTOCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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*We have "A Goodly Heritage"
Margaret L. Johnson*

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THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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WOODSTOCK, VERMONT



I HAVE been asked to write a brief history of the First Congregational Church, affectionately known as the Old White Meetinghouse. While I may not be the oldest member of this Church, I probably have had a longer continuous connection with it than any one else now living here. I have enjoyed looking back through the years, thus bringing to mind many happy and precious memories.

I can remember nine of the eighteen Pastors, and because of what I have heard from my parents and grandparents, I feel that I can remember much further back.

If the history of this Church stood by itself, it would be of little interest to anyone except its members and perhaps a few historically minded persons; but these white churches whose spires can be seen in almost every New England village have an influence not only in each community but more far reaching than we can estimate.

The historical records that I could find were inadequate, and I had to depend largely upon Mr. Henry Swan Dana's *History of Woodstock, Vermont*, some old pamphlets, what I have heard from my family, and upon my memories.

As what afterward came to be known as the Congregational Church was the first religious organization in Woodstock, we must go back to a time long before the White Church with its beautiful spire was built.

Mr. Dana writes, "The early settlers of this town, retaining somewhat of the spirit of the Pilgrim Fathers, regarded the observance of the Sabbath as of the first importance." As early as May, 1773, it is reported, Woodstock had a "gathered church"—a group of believers associated for worship and fellowship, but without any formal organization. However, during the first week of September, 1774, a warning for a Town Meeting was posted. The first article to be considered was to see if the Town would join with Hartford and Pomfret "to hire preaching for a term of time." As a result, the Reverend Aaron Hutchinson was to be hired for five years, in connection with the other towns.

This vote, however, did not go into effect until July, 1776, when Mr. Hutchinson moved his family from Hebron, Massachusetts, to Pomfret, Vermont.

He had preached occasionally during the past two years, but from 1776 to 1780 he divided his time among the three towns—"giving to each town an equal share of time and labor."

As far as Woodstock was concerned, the whole town was his Parish, but there was a small ecclesiastical body made up of persons who had brought their Church membership with them into the wilderness, and this group was known as "Mr. Hutchinson's Church." This Church consisted of 14 men and 5 women, but very soon about 50 members were added.

Mr. Hutchinson preached in a barn, said to be the first frame building in Woodstock. It was situated behind Mr. Norman Williams' house, or the White Cupboard. In winter, he resorted to some dwelling house.

We wish that we might have a picture of this little group of Christians gathering—probably in the kitchen of a small house—to listen to the reading of the Word of God and to one of the long sermons that the preachers gave in those days. Perhaps they sang one of the Watts Hymns, getting the key from a pitch pipe. As the preacher usually stayed to dinner, it is said that he would sometimes pause between his "fifthly" and "sixthly" to give his hostess a chance to turn the meat roasting over the fire.

On December 26, 1781, the members of "Mr. Hutchinson's Church" organized The First Church in the North Parish; and called as their pastor, the Reverent George Daman. Mr. Daman was the first settled minister of the Gospel in Woodstock, and he drew "the Minister's Lot." The Lot was probably on the hill road to West Woodstock.

During Mr. Daman's pastorate (1781-1792) the church was Presbyterian, loosely associated with the Grafton Presbytery; but toward the end of his pastorate the members "voiced the opinion" that "... the Congregational plan is the most agreeable to the Word of God."

There was a building used by this Church, situated on the Hill



THE WEST MEETINGHOUSE, 1789—?

*Built by the Baptists but also used by the
Congregationalists "for a number of years"
Located on Wyman Avenue, West Woodstock,
opposite the cemetery*



THE OLD WHITE MEETINGHOUSE
1806-1889

road to West Woodstock. It was made of logs and had no galleries, no musical instrument but a pitch pipe, and no heat.

There was a tithing man who was expected to see that perfect order and decorum were observed. There is a story of a worthy citizen who was unable to restrain his desire to refresh himself

during the long sermon, so he took out his tobacco box and helped himself. Unfortunately, the box closed with a loud snap, and to his chagrin, he was fined six shillings.

This log Meetinghouse was burned, and after Mr. Daman's death the Church had no meeting place and no Pastor.

There were occasional services in the Town Hall or with the Baptists, who had a small organization at that time and met in the West Meetinghouse.

It was soon after Mr. Daman's death that several influential members of the Church withdrew and founded the Universalist Society in connection with people of like faith from Pomfret and other towns.

If the Congregational Church had had as broad and liberal a creed then as it has today perhaps this break need not have come. The Universalists had no regular pastor, but the Rev. Hosea Ballou, who was a fine preacher, came occasionally and held a service in the Town Hall.

Already in 1786 the people had been planning to build a Church but could not agree upon a site. With the whole wilderness to choose from, some wanted one location and some another.

They consulted the Grafton Presbytery and even had a Council of Churches, with some representatives from outside the state. Finally they agreed, in proper Congregational fashion, to abide with the majority vote.

The majority decided to accept ground offered by Charles Marsh on which to build their Meetinghouse (a fitting name, signifying communion with God and one's neighbors). This land was on what was called the New Turnpike and is the place where the White Church now stands.

The frame of the Church was raised on July 4, 1806, and the next year it was nearly enough completed so that the Vermont Legislature held its religious service there on Election Day, a sermon being preached.

The building was completely finished in 1808. It was painted white inside and out, except for the pews.

I found a description of it in an old pamphlet. It is as follows:

“It stood 58 feet by 50 with a projection for the cupola and doors to the east. There were 38 windows with 40 lights each and two Venetian windows, one in the pulpit and the other over the middle door of the projection. There were three middle doors and three doors within the porch corresponding to the three aisles of the Church. There were 54 straight-backed pews on the lower floor, including the wall pews, and 19 pews in the gallery.

“The pulpit was an elaborate piece of work, rising about 15 feet above the lower floor and being reached by two flights of steps protected by balustrades. The pulpit and Venetian window were draped in red damask. The altar was placed at the foot of the pulpit with seats for the pastor and deacons and a table in front of them. There was no provision for the use of a single brick about the building. Since Meetinghouses were never heated, there was no need to build a chimney. The builder was Nathaniel Smith.”

In the original building, the pews were sold, with the highest bidder having the choice of location. We wonder if the choice was for the back pews as seems to be the case today. I am inclined to think the wall pews were most desired.

The money went toward the building fund, and there were also contributions in money or labor.

The pews were considered property and could be bought, sold, or willed to others. In recent years, many pews have been willed back to the Church, and the question of ownership has lost its importance and financial value.

The Paul Revere bell was hung in 1818. Some members of the Church went to Boston to select it. It cost \$319.95.

In 1818 a stove was put into the Church, but the pipe had to go out through a window.

This beautiful but probably uncomfortable Church has been twice remodeled—once in 1859, and again in 1890.

For many years there were both a Church and a Society. The Church was composed of the Church members and the Society, which was the financial arm of the Church, was composed of contributors, but not necessarily communicants.

The Church and Society jointly called a minister, and the Society fixed the salary and attended to raising the money. This arrangement continued until the Church was incorporated in 1920.

In reading the old records, I find that 16 men pledged sums from \$25 to \$500, giving security and promising to pay interest on the same until the principal sum was paid in full. Others pledged sums from \$3 to \$10 yearly.

The next pastor was the Reverend Walter Chapin, a fine man with a missionary spirit. He edited the *Vermont Missionary Gaze-ter*.

His salary was \$450 a year. Evidently it was hard to raise even that sum, for at one time the use of a field was given to the Church. It was to be planted with corn and potatoes the first year and wheat the next year. One-half of the proceeds of the crops was to go toward Mr. Chapin's salary, and the other half to the poor.

We find pledges as follows: Titus Hutchinson, use of land two years, one man ploughing, one planting, and one man reaping. Charles Dana and Benjamin Swan gave seed potatoes and \$5 in cash or labor. Wallis Hall gave \$3 but preferred to pay it to the parson. Norman Williams, Isaac Churchill, and others contributed time or money.

Titus Hutchinson was the bookkeeper, and after writing down the expenses evidently found that the account didn't come out quite right, for he adds, "Rum etc. might as well balance."

Mr. Dana in his *History* comments, "All honor to the Fathers; not having bank deposits on which to draw for the support of the minister, they drew for this purpose upon potato patches and wheat fields, cultivated with their own hands; and after paying expenses incurred, quietly let rum etc. balance the account."

In reading of this cooperative undertaking, I was reminded of a later Sunday when most of the able-bodied men of Woodstock started out with shovels—not to get money for the minister's salary, but to show Christian neighborliness, by making a road to flood-imprisoned Gaysville.

In 1825, some members withdrew and founded an Episcopal

Church, but the relations between the two churches remained cordial and at the time of the revival services under Mr. Burchard's preaching, they worked together.

The early Church took its responsibilities toward individual members very seriously. When a member neglected church attendance for a considerable time, the pastor, first alone and then with a deacon, labored with him. If their councils did not avail, then the matter was brought before the Church.

Opportunity was still given for repentance, but if the sinner remained hard-hearted, the Church gave the verdict, "He is not one of us."

One woman was suspended from Church membership because "She took and disposed of some Sunday School books and for falsehood and prevarication respecting the offense."

Pages of the records, and many meetings, were taken up with the case of a woman who married a widower, whose sons and the hired girl accused her of slander and profanity. She brought the case to the Church in page after page of manuscript. After the evidence had been considered and reconsidered she was vindicated.

We find a rather touching letter written by a repentant wanderer. It is as follows:

"Having once united with this Church and soon after travelled to distant states and remote regions of the land; and lost in some measure, but not wholly, my circumspection and faithfulness to religious duty, so much so as to have become a back slider from the fold of God; I now ask pardon of my God and Saviour Jesus Christ for thus dishonouring Him; and I ask the forgiveness of the Church and request to be received again into fellowship as my wish is to return sincerely to the true fold and the true Shepherd."

We find one amusing resolution in the early records; "Resolved that we find it inconsistent with the due observance of the Sabbath Day to visit the Post Office, except in cases of emergency arising from sickness."

The Parsonage was built in 1827, on land given by Charles



INTERIOR OF THE OLD WHITE MEETINGHOUSE
1859-1889

*Decorated for the wedding in 1869 of the
parents of Miss Elizabeth Mitchell*

Marsh. He considered the value of the land to be \$300. Ballard Dana did the building.

After Mr. Chapin's death, the Reverend John Richards was pastor for three and a half years and was followed by the Reverend Robert Southgate. I think that the Burchard revival services must have come during Mr. Southgate's pastorate, as in 1835, 119 members were admitted to the Church.

Mr. Southgate left for another field in 1836, and the people greatly regretted his departure.

The next minister was the Reverend Worthington Wright, who remained until 1850, when he was followed by Dr. Clement, who was here 15 years.

It was during these years (1859) that the Church building was repaired, the congregation worshiping with the Methodists while the work was being done. On the Sunday when the Church was reopened, the Methodists, with their pastor, attended in a body.

The records and specifications of this work are in existence, and it was agreed that the work was well done. The pulpit was lowered, pews changed to more comfortable ones, with red damask covering the cushions. There were some changes in the windows and the roof was shingled and, best of all, a furnace was put in the cellar. The cost was about \$5,000 of which the Ladies' Sewing Society gave \$1,500.

The wall pews were kept in this remodeling.

My personal recollections perhaps have no place in an historical sketch, but as this was the Church of my early childhood (although at a later date), I cannot refrain from giving them here. We will call them "Off the Record."

My very first remembrance of the Church was not quite a happy one. When too young to go even to Sunday School, I went with two older girls to what was called a "Sunday School Concert." The teacher, not understanding children very well, separated me from my friends and put me in a pew alone, where I felt forsaken and distressed. My father, seeing my plight, strode down the aisle and, with a stern look at the teacher, took me to the safety of a pew with him. I remember, also, when I was old

enough to attend Sunday School that I went home one day with a paper on which was a verse for me to learn. I think my mother must have looked amused, for I remember the verse well. It was, "I have been young and now I am old, but I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his seed begging bread."

All my later recollections have been happy ones. The Church bell rang at nine o'clock Sunday mornings to remind us that it was the Lord's Day and again at 10:15, and then tolled a few strokes at 10:30 as we entered the Church.

I well remember going down the side aisle and opening the low white door to the wall pew, going up a low step, and sitting with my back to one of the north windows. I could look all over the Church, see the south gallery and the choir and organ in the east gallery. The organ was bought in 1827 and cost \$1,500.

I loved the grand old hymns, although sometimes the words puzzled me. I wondered what "Extol the stem of Jesse's rod" could mean.

I was happy to be there with my parents, for it was before the time when it was considered too fatiguing for a child to sit quietly in church for an hour. What if I didn't understand a word of the sermon! I had on my best dress and was with my parents, and I am sure that I absorbed something of the atmosphere of reverence and worship.

Dr. Clement was an old man when he resigned. The Society voted to pay him a year's salary after his resignation and invited him to remain in the parsonage for that time if he wished to do so.

The Reverend Alfred Brooks Dascomb came next, and the parsonage was not too large for his family, as he had two sets of twins and several other children. Two of his sons afterwards became ministers, I think. In his letter of resignation, Mr. Dascomb frankly said that he had an opportunity to go to a larger church where the salary would be more nearly adequate to the needs of his large family.

The Reverend Lewis Hicks followed him. He was a widower and married a daughter of Judge Barrett of this town for his second wife.

I remember Mr. Hicks slightly, but with the advent of the next pastor, Rev. James Brodie, my relationship with the families of the parsonage became close.

He was here seven years. When Mr. Brodie, a self-contained Scotsman, preached his farewell sermon, he took for his text these words, "And Jacob served seven years for Rachel and it seemed but as a day for the love that he bore her." In the midst of it, much to his surprise, his voice broke and he had difficulty in continuing. As a young girl, I liked to follow his logical mind. After singing two hymns and hearing Scripture readings from both Old and New Testaments, I could usually tell what the subject of the sermon would be, and sometimes guess the text.

With his young wife and little daughter, he left Woodstock, his first Parish, to go to Salem, Mass., his last settled Parish.

The Chapel was built in 1880—the gift of Mr. Frederick Billings in memory of his parents.

The work of remodeling the Church was begun during Mr. Brodie's time (1889), but was finished after our next pastor, the Reverend Peter McMillan came (1890).

Mr. Billings, whose generosity made the work possible, was very ill and couldn't attend the service, so Mr. Brodie presented the keys of the Church for Mr. Billings and Mr. Southgate accepted them for the Church. President Buckham of Burlington gave the sermon, and Mr. Dana an historical statement, and local ministers took part in the service.

During the time that Mr. Brodie was here, Evangelistic services were held by Dwight L. Moody. The Church was crowded at all the services. I do not remember that there were many so-called conversions, but the sincerity and earnestness of the speaker must have had an effect upon the community.

This was the time when Gospel Hymns were sung. "Pull for the Shore," and "Rescue the Perishing" were favorites; also the tender "There Were Ninety and Nine."

Mr. McMillan's lovely wife died while he was taking a sea voyage at the invitation of a young man of the Parish. For a time he could not preach, but he afterward married again, a kind



THE WHITE MEETINGHOUSE AFTER REMODELING 1889-1890

mother for his three children and a devoted wife and companion for himself.

He left here after ten years to go to Northampton, Mass., and the Reverend Frank Putnam was here until 1906. He had an especial interest in Woodstock as his grandfather, Rev. Worthington Wright, was a former pastor.

The Reverend Benjamin Swift, with his fine mother and lovely wife, came next to the parsonage. The Church prospered, the Sunday School was built up and, as Mr. Swift was a good business man, the financial affairs of the Church improved.

Mrs. Swift's wonderful singing voice greatly enriched our Church services, and she was very generous about using her voice for the benefit of the community.

In 1917 the Reverend Robbins Barstow came and was here only three years—and that time was broken into by the War, during which he served as a chaplain. While he was away, the Christian Church was invited to worship with us, bringing their pastor, Mr. Morrill, with them.

The people realized that Mr. Barstow (Bob as he was usually called) was too gifted a young man to stay very long in a small Parish, and he was soon called to a larger field, and afterward became President of Hartford Theological Seminary. At present he is associated with Church World Service.

The Church was incorporated in 1920, the year that the Reverend Herbert Hines came. He had the longest pastorate, as he was here from 1920 to 1942. That he loved Woodstock and the Church was proved in many ways, especially by his book of poems called "The Old White Meetinghouse." It was he who planned the lighting of the Church tower at Christmas time, a practice that has given us so much pleasure.

The Reverend Theodore Gregg came to us in 1942 and left in 1946. We remember him with affection, and deeply regret the great sorrow that came to him here in the loss of his beloved wife.

This very week our present pastor, the Reverend Arthur Colbourn, has arrived in Woodstock. He comes to us from the Chaplain's Corps of the United States Army. During World War II

he was stationed in the South Pacific Theatre and later in India.

The Woman's Auxiliary (started as a Sewing Society in early days) and the Friendly Circle of younger women have both been real assets to the Church.

Very early the Sewing Society gave \$247 to the American Missionary Society. In 1842 they gave lamps and carpets for the Church and gave \$1,500 when the Church was remodeled the first time.

The Church School was started in 1814 in Mr. Chapin's dining room. It has continued without interruption ever since. We look to the Church School and the Pilgrim Fellowship to feed the Church.

I have had the rare privilege of being connected with the Church School much of the time for about sixty years and greatly value contacts with the boys and girls.

There was a men's organization at one time, but it was given up. I do not know when the so-called Church sociables began, but I know that some of the older people were disturbed at the idea of having a kitchen connected with a Church, while others thought that occasionally meeting together for supper was a good thing. At first only sandwiches, coffee, and delicious cake were served informally. As the price was only ten cents, all the family could go, but the children sometimes made considerable confusion.

Ten men who were connected with this Church have become ministers. Four of these were sons of former pastors.

A Church is not just a building, any more than a body is the whole man; but it is a symbol of something very precious to multitudes of people.

May the doors of the Old White Church never be closed, but may it continue, through its Services and the lives of the men and women connected with it, to be the source of strength and comfort and inspiration that it has been to many through the years.

I will close by reading two of Mr. Hines' poems, "The Spire" and "The Old White Meetinghouse."



THE SPIRE

Above the snow and grass and lovely trees
The surely graceful spire of this white church
Is lifted prayerfully, a silent sign
Reminding everyone who comes quite near
Of life that is not things, and of the heights
To which at best the soul of man aspires.
Here through the changing years it stands unchanged,
Lest we forget that on a common road,
And ever waiting is the house of God.
Its shadow falls not over grass and snow,
But on the daily path of those who pass
To work or trade, to sorrow or to joy;
And it reminds us all that we do well
If all our days begin and end in Him.

THE OLD WHITE MEETINGHOUSE

The old Church lives—
For as its building shows the new design
That covers up the staunch and sturdy frame
Set solidly in place so long ago,
So faith and love, inspired by those who first
Paused here to pray, live on in other scenes.
They had their plainer building, three front doors,
And galleries on the sides; we have our new
Designs for beauty's art and comfort's grace.
But as the bell tower stands above the trees,
As it has stood unchanged through all the years
To point the place of worship, so the faith
And love, that more than word or fond design
Make up a Church, live on, and we still have
The Old White Meetinghouse.

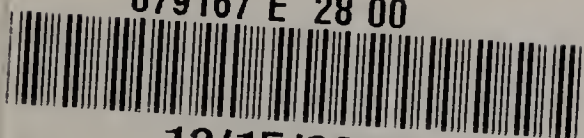




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